

## The Third World, global Islam and pragmatism: the making of Iranian foreign policy

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# SWP Research Paper

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and Security Affairs

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## The Third World, Global Islam and Pragmatism

The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy

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**The Third World, Global Islam and Pragmatism:  
The Making of Iranian Foreign Policy**

The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of the last nation states to deliberately position itself strategically and ideologically in opposition to the United States. The reasons for this lie in the history of Iran in the twentieth century and – in the view of the regime in Tehran – in the Islamic character and specifically Persian features of the country. More than thirty years after the Islamic revolution it is still unclear to many in the Western world what ideology Iran actually espouses and hence what are the principles and goals guiding Iranian foreign policy. Opinions on this subject are determined on the one hand by mistrust of an Islamic regime and fear of religious fundamentalism and on the other by surprise at the pragmatism of Iranian foreign policy.

Depending on which of these perceptions is the dominant one, this leads to two opposing assessments of Iran: either that its policies are dominated by religious irrationalism, which, in combination with Iran's nuclear programme, constitutes a global threat – adherents of this view believe the international community should rigorously oppose this programme; or the opposite view that ideology is only window dressing for a nation state acting rationally in defence of its own interests. A closer look at the main priorities of Iranian foreign policy reveals that neither of these positions is tenable as such.

Ideology and pragmatism in fact go hand in hand in Iranian foreign policy. The question of whether the Islamic Republic stands for an ideology that exploits the resources of the Iranian nation for its own ends, or whether the nation-state of Iran is using an ideological construct to boost its status in the international community must ultimately go unanswered, since even in Iran itself no consensus exists on this point. What observers do agree about is that anti-Americanism forms the basis for the ideology and hence for Iranian foreign policy. A shift in this stance would obviously have far-reaching consequences for Iran's relations with the international community, and there have in fact been repeated instances of cooperation between the United States and Iran motivated by converging interests, albeit not sufficient to bring about a breakthrough in relations. The reasons for the continuing distance between the two states are not only ideologi-

cal but often practical. The Americans, for instance, stumble over the question of who should make contact with whom in Iran.

Iran's institutional framework and how Iranian foreign policy is formulated behind the scenes are the source of considerable uncertainty in the West. How much latitude Iranian decision-makers – whether the president, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution or the general secretary of the Supreme National Security Council – have in foreign policy has been a matter of repeated speculation, although it is actually quite easy to trace the process by which a foreign policy consensus is arrived at. Of particular interest to Western observers are the latest developments on the Iranian think tank scene, which is becoming an increasingly important factor underpinning Iranian diplomacy.

Most studies seeking to explain the true nature of Iran and how it functions stress the role of Islam, specifically the dominant Shiite confession (in its revolutionary form), or the distinctly Persian features of Iranian culture. What they often overlook, however, is a political discourse that is central for Iranians, namely, the Third World rhetoric from which the Iranians derive their identity and their self-image as the spearhead of developing countries. Yet it is precisely this view of the world that constitutes the real ideological sticking point between the West and Iran, since it generally leads to diametrically opposed interpretations of world events. This applies not only to the classic case of different readings of the Non-Proliferation Treaty but also to less complex issues, such as the question of whether Iran is actually isolated or not. It also explains why Iran assumes as a matter of course that its actions and behaviour will have the support of what it calls the “true international community” – represented by the Non-Aligned Movement and Islamic countries – which in turn bolsters Iranian self-confidence.

For the international community Iran's geostrategic importance means that alongside its nuclear programme the country's regional policy is the most important element of Tehran's foreign policy. Here two main focuses can be identified: on the one hand, Central Asia and the Caucasus and on the other, the Middle East, defined as the area stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Levant, including Egypt. Both of these regions are of equal importance for Iran, yet there are two reasons why its status and prestige are derived mainly from its activities in and vis-à-vis the Middle East: first, because in Western eyes Iran's

hostile attitude towards Israel and its rejection of American hegemony in the region constitute the greatest threat to regional security; and second, because for an important part of the Iranian elite the Middle East is of major significance for ideological and biographical reasons. Tehran's relations with the former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus have never carried comparable weight and have been considered secondary both by the West and by Iran – even though Iran's security policy and economic ambitions would suggest that the Central Asian-Caucasus region should take priority.

The changes ushered in by the Arab Spring in the Middle East initially had no repercussions for Iran's strategic position. Egypt's return to its role as a moderate Islamic power was greeted by Iran, in some cases even lauded. The real test for Iran is Syria. The popular rebellion against the Assad regime and the decision of the Palestinian Hamas to opt out of the so-called “axis of resistance” have dealt severe ideological blows to Tehran. The long and painful agony of the Assad regime has already produced a strategic stalemate between regional and global actors. In the long term this crisis has the potential to escalate into a regional or super-regional war waged on the basis of ethnicity and confession. This would be neither in the interests of the West nor of Iran. As in the case of Afghanistan it is likely to prove impossible to resolve the Syrian crisis without the involvement of Iran. In view of the new situation in the Middle East, therefore, a review of relations with Iran would seem advisable, making a resolution of the nuclear issue all the more urgent.

# Iranian Foreign Policy Actors and Institutions

Western observers complain time and again about what they view as the complex and non-transparent Iranian foreign policy system, saying it is neither clear how responsibilities are allocated nor what influence the institutions in question have on this policy field. It would certainly be true to say that Tehran's foreign policy is not only formulated and conducted by the Foreign Ministry. Other institutions, such as the National Security Council, the President's Office, the Office of the Supreme Leader and the parliament also participate. What is more, via the parliament, the foreign policy decision-making process is also informed by the recommendations of state think tanks, declarations and public statements of the Grand Ayatollahs, and public opinion as conveyed by the media. Extreme splinter groups also bring their influence to bear, although this seems to be waning.

In practice the problem of unclear allocation of competencies between state and revolutionary institutions is regulated by a three-step convention.<sup>1</sup> This is based on a mechanism of intensive preliminary consultations in which the Supreme Leader is assigned a central role.

1. Foreign policy analysis and the real *opinion-forming process* take place within the formal institutions.
2. The *decision-making process* takes place formally (institutions) and informally (political networks) within the political elites to which not only active but also former politicians belong, as do "non-political" clerics.
3. The final *decision* is formulated by the Supreme Leader as a consensus reached by the political elite.

<sup>1</sup> Bernard Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran* (Paris, 2010), 158; Mehran Kamrava, "Iranian National-Security Debates: Factionalism and Lost Opportunities," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 14, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 84–100; Walter Posch, *E pluribus unum: Decision-makers and Decision-making in Iran*, ISS Policy Brief 02 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies [EUISS], August 2008).

## The Foreign Ministry and the President's Office

At the level of government it is the *Foreign Ministry* and the *President's Office* which prepare foreign policy decisions. Their clearly regulated competences assign the president the stronger position, making it difficult for even proactive foreign ministers to put their own stamp on foreign policy. This is compounded by the fact that the foreign minister often belongs to a different political group to the president, a deliberate custom designed to allow other forces to have a hand in shaping foreign policy. Politically this construction is not always viable, as was clearly illustrated when Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki was removed from office at the end of 2010 by President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad.<sup>2</sup> In dismissing Mottaki, Ahmadinezhad was following the international trend of the *presidentialisation* of foreign policy.<sup>3</sup> As president he appointed personal envoys for various regions of the world and spheres of international policy who then de facto governed the Foreign Ministry from the President's Office. Nevertheless, even under Ahmadinezhad it was the Foreign Ministry that dominated the foreign policy opinion-forming process, its structural strength (*esprit de corps*, well-established procedures) proving superior to the president's personal envoys.

Their appointment is, however, also the expression of an emerging new generation of foreign policy personnel. The professional diplomats who served the previous imperial regime or who belonged to the first generation of revolutionaries in the Foreign Ministry had graduated mainly from European or US universities. They are now retiring from active service and are

<sup>2</sup> Walter Posch, *Foreign Minister Mottaki Dismissed and Salehi Installed: New Trends in Iranian Diplomacy before Istanbul Nuclear Talks*, SWP-Comments 2/2011 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, January 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Volker Perthes, "Der zweite Mann: Präsidialisierung der Außenpolitik," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, April 25, 2010; Seyyed Hamid Mottaghi, "The Adventure of the Commissioners Who Became Advisers. A Study of the Goals and Reasons for the Appointment of Special Envoys for Diplomacy," *Hamshahri Mah* (October 2010): 64–66 (the Persian titles and quotes were translated by the author).



being replaced by actors who experienced the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) as soldiers and who were educated entirely in Iran. Future Iranian diplomats will no longer come equipped with the knowledge of Western culture that still characterised those of the revolutionary generation. The career of the current nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, who joined the Foreign Ministry after serving in the security apparatus, is a good example. How much the new generation of Iranian diplomats lacks a cultural and political understanding of the West is illustrated by their behaviour following the Western outcry prompted by the so-called “Holocaust conference” in 2006. They were not only surprised to learn but also incapable of recognising that the West saw Ahmadinezhad’s inflammatory statements in the context of the hardening of the Iranian position on the nuclear issue. Since then the horror vision of a “nuclear holocaust” initiated by Iran – i.e., the fear that Iran could wipe out the state of Israel with nuclear weapons – has dominated the image of Iran in the eyes of the Western public.

### The President, the Parliament and Splinter Groups

The president plays a central role in the political decision-making process. On the basis of the constitution and within the given ideological framework he is responsible for setting new foreign policy emphases and priorities. The only limitation is that he has to answer for them before parliament, the Supreme Leader and the Supreme National Security Council. This can lead to dramatically diverging interpretations of Iranian foreign policy, as the example of Israel shows: President Mohammad Khatami visited the synagogue in Tehran,<sup>4</sup> promoted his “Dialogue between Civilisations” and gave to understand that in the event of a resolution of the Middle East conflict Iran did not wish to be “more Palestinian than the Palestinians”. President Ahmadinezhad, by contrast, quoted an old statement of Khomeini’s about the need to eliminate Israel and in 2006 organised the above-mentioned “Holocaust conference”.<sup>5</sup> The differences in emphasis

in a foreign policy that basically remained the same could not have been greater.

The situation is different with the various interest groups and political groups, which exert influence both on public opinion and, via parliament, on the decisions taken by the president. Foreign policy debates in the Iranian *parliament* can be very fierce, particularly when supporters of the president are in the minority, as was the case in the final years of Khatami’s presidency. Yet even then, according to the constitution and convention, the president is still in a stronger position. An Iranian president is only considered to be a “lame duck” in foreign policy when the Supreme Leader publically withdraws his favour, as Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad experienced from spring 2011 onwards if not indeed before.

Despite visible efforts to base decision-making in foreign policy questions on a consensus, it happens time and again that individual groups feel overlooked and try to exert their influence through aggressive rhetoric or even violence. These are groups connected with the ideological volunteer militias (Basij and Hezbollah) whose mouthpiece is the daily *Keyhan*. Their activities are primarily directed towards domestic policy, but their wrath is kindled by controversial foreign policy issues such as Iran’s relationship with Israel and the United States. It was they who in the 1980s obtained the pronouncement of the death sentence against the Anglo-Indian writer Salman Rushdie at a time when the Rafsanjani government was seeking a de-escalation of foreign policy and cautiously liberalising domestic policy. These forces also bore responsibility for the series of murders in the 1990s to which renowned intellectuals fell victim; these too were intended as punitive gestures against the president – then Khatami – for his perceived liberalism. And President Ahmadinezhad, too, was forced in the summer of 2012 by these militias to publically declare his willingness to negotiate with the United States a mistake.<sup>6</sup> The storming of the British embassy by the Basij in 2011 belongs in the same category. This incident led to mutual expulsions of embassy personnel and almost resulted in the breaking-off of British-Iranian relations. Unlike the occupation of the US embassy in 1979, this attempt via revolutionary actions and pressure from the street to influence the country’s foreign policy did not, however, meet with sympathy

4 Arash Abaie, “Report of Iranian President’s Visit from Yousef-Abad Synagogue,” [http://www.iranjewish.com/News\\_e/22-1.htm](http://www.iranjewish.com/News_e/22-1.htm).

5 In 2012 Ahmadinezhad admitted to the US journalist Barbara Slavin that this had been a mistake. See “How Many Billions Will Ahmadinezhad’s Late Regrets Cost the Iranian People?” (Persian), *Baztab*, September 29, 2012.

6 “The President in a Three-hour Meeting with Student Activists” (Persian), <http://www.598.ir>, August 3, 2012. The students were Basijis.

among the public or the regime. Indeed, the Iranian Foreign Ministry condemned this breach of diplomatic conventions.

## The Supreme National Security Council

The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) of the Islamic Republic of Iran is chaired by the president and comprises the most important representatives of the military (the General Staff, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC) and the secret service, the foreign minister, representatives of the Supreme Leader, and other ministers as required. The significance of the SNSC lies in the fact that the president can declare any issue to be a matter of national security, thus sometimes turning the SNSC into a kind of ersatz government.<sup>7</sup> Although the SNSC is primarily a technical administrative body, when it comes to delicate substantive issues it is assigned the function of a clearing house, which prepares the various opinions and standpoints in the institution into a final draft resolution for the Supreme Leader. In most cases, however, its work comprises the routine handling of security policy issues, led by the general secretary in place of the president. Above and beyond this the SNSC is the most important forum for the IRGC to present their foreign policy ideas. The concept of “defence diplomacy”<sup>8</sup> presented in 2012, which envisaged an upgrading of the Ministry of Defence vis-à-vis the Foreign Ministry, failed to win approval. The SNSC also publishes strategic analyses for the future, which provide the basis for defence planning.<sup>9</sup>

The status of the SNSC was enhanced when General Secretary Dr. Hassan Rouhani was appointed Iranian chief negotiator in the nuclear dispute with the EU in 2003. The reason for this appointment was the collapse of the consensus on how to proceed with regard to nuclear policy. Some political forces represented in the Security Council were obstructing the policy of then President Khatami for tactical reasons connected with domestic policy, and Rouhani was well connected with both reformists and various conservative

groups and enjoyed the confidence of Khatami and the Supreme Leader and was hence a more suitable person to conduct negotiations with the EU and later with the E3+3 (Great Britain, France, Germany, USA, China and Russia). Since then these two posts have been linked. The weakening of President Ahmadinezhad from 2011 onwards in turn was accompanied by a political strengthening of the new (since 2007) Chairman Saeed Jalili, thus further enhancing the function of the general secretary of the SNSC.

## The Clergy, the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts

The High Clergy in Qom, the *Guardian Council*, the *Expediency Council* and the *Assembly of Experts* tend to be mainly consultative bodies. The High Clergy are generally informed of important political events, such as nuclear negotiations, but otherwise have a hands-off attitude to foreign policy. Only under Ahmadinezhad's presidency were there such major tensions between the clergy and the government that the clergy used its influence to torpedo foreign policy.<sup>10</sup>

Even more than the High Clergy, the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council have a right to hearings with the Supreme Leader.<sup>11</sup> They not only advise him but also coordinate the work of the various institutions such as parliament, the Foreign Ministry and the SNSC. They also strive to maintain a balance between different political tendencies with the aim of ensuring that foreign policy is supported by all political forces.

## Think-Tanks and Foreign Policy and Security Journals

Like other countries Iran has research institutes for foreign and security policy whose expertise the Foreign Ministry draws on. The researchers at these

<sup>7</sup> Mahmoud Asgari, “Iran's Defense Diplomacy,” *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly*, vol. 10, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2012): 167–91, here 184–86.

<sup>8</sup> “Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi on Iran's Defense Diplomacy” (Tehran: Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies, October 2012), <http://en.merc.ir/default.aspx?tabid=98&ArticleId=312>.

<sup>9</sup> Asgari, “Iran's Defense Diplomacy” (see note 7), 178.

<sup>10</sup> “Clear Words from Hojatolislam Rahbar: the Grand Ayatollahs Have Closed the Doors of Their Offices to the Government!” (Persian), *Shaffaf*, May 19, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> The Assembly of Experts (“Assembly of Experts of the Leadership,” <http://www.khobregan.ir>) monitors the execution of office of the Supreme Leader, and the “Council of Guardians of the Islamic Constitution,” <http://www.shoura-gc.ir>, monitors the parliament. In the event of conflicts with the parliament the “Consultative Council for Establishing the Interests of the System” (<http://www.maslehat.ir>) is called in.

institutes enjoy relative freedom in articulating their views. In this context Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei supports the free exchange of views and emphasises that differences of opinion between himself and the experts at these institutes should not be interpreted as opposition to the system of the “guardianship of the Islamic jurist (*velayat-e faqih*)” of Iran.<sup>12</sup>

The majority of the think tanks were founded only in the early 1990s under the Rafsanjani presidency. This applies, for example, to the *Diplomatic School*, which is primarily a training institute but also engages in research. The main centre for research into foreign and security policy is the Center for International Research and Education (CIRE)<sup>13</sup> located in the Foreign Ministry itself. The CIRE includes the internationally known Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS),<sup>14</sup> which is both a research centre and a political advisory body. The IPIS also organises international conferences and was one of the most interesting political think tanks in the Middle East until the “Holocaust conference” in 2006. (Thereafter the IPIS was boycotted and only in 2009, following a change of personnel, did the international research community begin consulting it again.) The IPIS publishes nine foreign policy journals in several languages and is indirectly represented abroad by the research attachés at the embassies. In October 2012 the head of the IPIS was charged with coordinating Iranian track two diplomacy.

Like the Foreign Ministry the Expediency Council also has its own think tank, the Center for Strategic Research (CSR),<sup>15</sup> which likewise conducts foreign and security policy research and participates in Iranian track two diplomacy. Both institutes are well connected with the relevant academic institutions and with the active diplomatic service. It is not uncommon for Iranian diplomats to spend several years doing research at one of these two institutions.

The third think tank with direct political relevance is the research unit of the Iranian parliament, the Majlis Research Center (MRC), which was restructured in 2012. The chairman of the parliamentary foreign affairs committee, Kazem Jalali, and the parliamen-

tary speaker, Ali Larijani, are trying to give the MRC a more prominent role.<sup>16</sup> However, the centre has yet to establish itself as a port of call for foreign contacts.

The *President's Office* and *military establishments* (the army and the IRGC, the joint general staff, military schools or academies) also have their own foreign and security policy research units whose research findings are published in renowned Iranian security journals (*Journal for National Security*, *Journal for National Defence*, *Name-ye Defa*, *Journal for Strategic Information*, all in Persian). It is almost impossible to gain access to these journals abroad, since even specialist libraries in Europe or the United States rarely carry journals in Persian. Of central importance for the opinion-forming process in security policy is the Supreme National Defence University (SNDU), which is also where cadres destined for the Iranian security elite are educated.<sup>17</sup> A Committee for Defence Diplomacy under Defence Minister General Vahidi was also founded in the Defence Ministry, which operates like a think tank but has yet to make an appearance on the international stage.<sup>18</sup>

Finally, mention should be made of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies (IMESS)<sup>19</sup> and the Tehran International Studies and Research Institute (TISRI).<sup>20</sup> Both are independent institutes, publish several journals (e.g. *Discourse*, published by the IMESS) and act as political advisory bodies. Their work is complemented by specialised university institutes such as the Africa Research Center and the Tarbiat-Modares-University<sup>21</sup> and *privately initiated research institutions*. The influence of the latter depends very much on what access their founders have to political decision-makers. The most important are the International Institute for Caspian Studies of former Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Maleki;<sup>22</sup> the Association Iranienne des Études Internationales, chaired by human rights expert Mehdi

<sup>12</sup> “The views of experts that do not concur with those of the Supreme Leader are not regarded as opposition to the rule of the Islamic jurist” (Persian), *Tabnak*, August 6, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Center for International Research and Education of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.dermfa.ir>.

<sup>14</sup> Institute for Political and International Studies, <http://www.ipis.ir>.

<sup>15</sup> Center for Strategic Research, <http://www.csr.ir>.

<sup>16</sup> Majlis Research Center, <http://rc.majlis.ir/en/news/show/816611>.

<sup>17</sup> Supreme National Defence University, <http://www.sndu.ac.ir>.

<sup>18</sup> Asgari, “Iran’s Defense Diplomacy” (see note 7), p. 180.

<sup>19</sup> Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies, <http://en.merc.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=180>.

<sup>20</sup> Abrar Moaser Tehran International Studies and Research Institute, <http://www.tisri.org>.

<sup>21</sup> Tarbiat Modares University, African Studies Center, <http://www.modares.ac.ir/en/reu/ctr/ASC/res/pub/fas>.

<sup>22</sup> International Institute for Caspian Studies, <http://www.caspianstudies.com>.

Zakerian,<sup>23</sup> which publishes the renowned *International Studies Journal* (ISJ); and the Ravand Institute for Economic and International Studies led by its founder and CEO Hossein Adeli, former governor of the Central Bank of Iran and former ambassador to Great Britain.<sup>24</sup> Ravand has, however, severely curtailed its international activities in recent years.

Whereas the publications of the above-mentioned institutes and associations are targeted mainly at an academic readership, the dailies *Ettelaat* and *Hamshahri* publish weekly or monthly magazines (respectively, *Ettelaat-e Siyasi va Eqtesadi* and *Hamshahri-ye Diplomati*) focusing on international relations and strategic issues. The political magazines of various organisations, such as the Islamic volunteers organisation *Basij-e Mostaza'fin* (*Okhovvat*, *Hedayat*, *Misaq-e Basiji*, *Faslname-ye Motaleate Basij*),<sup>25</sup> also carry commentaries on foreign policy positions. The quality of these publications is rather modest, but they do provide a good insight into the political discourse of an important minority of radical Islamists from whose ranks the regime recruits some of its personnel.

Finally mention should be made of the *Internet*, particularly the blogospheres and websites where members of the military and politicians comment on foreign policy. Altogether these Internet platforms and the above-mentioned journals make up the forums in which academics and the general public can express their opinions on Iranian foreign policy. In recent years, moreover, Iranian public diplomacy has become increasingly important. The founding of *PressTV*, for example, represented an attempt by the Iranians to counteract the impact of Western public diplomacy (US State Department, NATO) in the region and in Iran.<sup>26</sup>

## The Role of the Supreme Leader in Iranian Foreign Policy

According to the Iranian Constitution, Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, the “guardian jurist” (*vali-feqh*) and “leader of the Islamic revolution” (*rahbar-e enghelab-e eslami*), is ranked above the state president but does not himself strictly speaking belong to the government apparatus. Nevertheless, political power is concentrated in his hands and his competencies are both administrative-bureaucratic and clerical and ideological.

### The Organisation of the *beyt-e rahbari* and the Interpretation of Ideology

The Bureau of the Supreme Leader (*beyt-e rahbari*)<sup>27</sup> is regarded as the country’s real power centre. The staff of the *beyt* are involved in all levels of the institutional opinion-forming process and thus informed about planned foreign policy in advance. As a rule the Supreme Leader supports the political stance of the president, and when differences of opinion arise he is able, discreetly but efficiently, to bring pressure to bear. Fundamental foreign policy decisions, such as the decision to continue the E3+3 negotiations or Iran’s insistence on its right to uranium enrichment, are formulated as consensus decisions by the Supreme Leader following intensive consultation in which the bureau (*beyt*) and the SNSC have important roles to play.

Of special importance for foreign policy are the public speeches of the Supreme Leader, in which he expounds the Iranian line to the Iranian and foreign public before an audience consisting of regime supporters, civil servants and political commentators. These speeches define the government’s ideological latitude. In certain cases the Supreme Leader pursues a parallel foreign policy via the cultural institutes and the defence attachés at the embassies. This was often what happened under the Khatami presidency, whose detente with the West led some actors in Iran to fear that the Islamic Republic would lose its standing among radical Islamic forces.

<sup>23</sup> International Studies Journal, <http://isj.ir/english/aboutus.htm>.

<sup>24</sup> Ravand Institute for Economic and International Studies, <http://www.ravandinstitute.com>.

<sup>25</sup> Links to some of these magazines can be found under <http://www.hadi.basirat.ir>; on the Basijis see <http://www.basij.ir> and <http://www.bro.ir>.

<sup>26</sup> Mehrdad Kiaei, “The OIC and Public Diplomacy: Limits and Opportunities,” *Discourse. An Iranian Quarterly*, vol. 10, no. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2012): 145–65.

<sup>27</sup> Nothing is known about the structure of the *beyt* nor precisely what its functions are. What is known for certain is that it employs 5,000 people.

## Khamenei's Revolutionary and Clerical Functions Abroad

The *theological-clerical function* (*marja'e taqlid* and *vali-feqh*) of the Supreme Leader is emphasised vis-à-vis countries with Shiite populations or strong Shiite minorities, such as Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan, and the parallel foreign policy hence becomes more important. The relationship with Lebanon is a special case where relations between Iran and Hezbollah and the Shiites take precedence over normal bilateral relations with Beirut.<sup>28</sup> Khamenei justifies the preferential treatment given to Hezbollah by citing his function as ruling guardian jurist and as a religious "model for emulation". Hezbollah is thus part of the Iranian regime (though not of the Iranian state).<sup>29</sup>

The personal connections behind this close relationship are also interesting. Hezbollah General Secretary Seyyed Hasan Nasrallah is regarded as a confidant of Khamenei, and he and Muhammad Yazbek are Khamenei's Lebanese representatives (*vakil*) in his function as a Shiite cleric.<sup>30</sup> There is a special relationship of trust between the Supreme Leader and the mastermind behind Hezbollah's military apparatus, Imad Mughniya, assassinated in 2008, who also worked closely with the IRGC.<sup>31</sup> Hezbollah and the IRGC are also known to cooperate closely in the field of security (carrying out joint attacks in Western countries, training pro-Iranian groups in the region), so we can assume that the Supreme Leader and his staff are well informed about the activities of the Lebanese organisation. As a rule Hezbollah acts largely independently, albeit in consultation and in some cases in cooperation with Iran. This autonomy has apparently increased since the 33-day war against Israel in 2006. But since the murder of Imad Mughniyah in 2008 representatives of the IRGC have once again begun to wield more influence.

28 Houchang Esfandiari Chehabi, "Iran and Lebanon in the Revolutionary Decade," in *ibidem*, *Distant Relations. Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years* (London and New York, 2006), 201–30.

29 Olfa Lamoulou, "La Syrie et le Hezbollah: Partenaires sous contrainte?" *Le Hezbollah, état des lieux*, ed. Sabrina Mervin (Paris, 2008), 93–108.

30 Sabrina Mervin, "La guidance du théologien-juriste: de la théorie à la pratique," in *ibid.* (ed.), *Le Hezbollah* (see note 29), 207–212 (211).

31 Elie Chalhoub, "Imad Mughniyah in Iran: The Stuff of Legends," *al akhbar* (online), February 12, 2012; "Imad Mughniyah Was Murdered in Damascus" (Persian), *Entekhab*, February 15, 2008.

Plans for Iraq ran along similar lines. Renowned Iraqi clerics, many from mixed Iranian-Iraqi families, worked in high-up positions in the Bureau of the Supreme Leader or else held Iranian government offices. Yet the political platforms of the Iraqi Shiites initiated by the Iranians (Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq [SCIRI], the Badr Brigade and later Muqtada al Sadr's organisation) never achieved the level of efficiency and significance of the Lebanese Hezbollah. And the present head of the Iraqi government, Nuri al Maleki, is a politician whose roots are in the Iraqi Dawa movement, which has always refused to be patronised by Iran. In bilateral relations with Iraq the Bureau of the Supreme Leader thus has a more minor role to play.

By the same token, Khamenei has had little success in bringing the networks and theological centres of the high Shiite clergy in Iraq into line (Najaf and Kerbela), even if they are more dependent on Tehran today than they were a generation ago.<sup>32</sup> Most Iraqi grand ayatollahs still act autonomously and maintain a critical distance to the policies of their neighbour.<sup>33</sup> While Iran must heed the sensitivities of the high Shiite clergy in its foreign policy, it cannot automatically count on its support.<sup>34</sup>

## Leader of the Islamic World?

Iran's claim to be the leading Islamic power – aptly expressed in the title "Commander of the Faithful" (*amir al-momenin* or *vali-amr-e moslemin-e jehan*) assumed by the Supreme Leader – has led to major problems with the Sunni countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, but also Egypt and Turkey. A commonly held view among Islamic circles in Tehran is that Khamenei's function as the theological and political "rule of the Islamic jurist" (*velayat-e faqih*) only needs to be properly explained<sup>35</sup> for sufficient numbers of Sunnis to submit

32 Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja. Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism*, Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2006 (Policy Focus, No. 59), <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus59final.pdf>.

33 Laurence Louer, *Chiisme et politique au Moyen-Orient, Iran, Irak, Liban, monarchies du Golfe* (Paris, 2008), 43–48 and 71, 72.

34 "A Special Message from the Supreme Leader to Ayatollah Sistani" (Persian), *Fararu*, January 6, 2008.

35 "The *fatwa* that overcame the misfortune of the divisions among Muslims" (Persian), *Okhovvat*, 11 (Autumn 2010): 54–63.

to it. Outside Iran, of course, this leadership claim is scarcely recognised.<sup>36</sup>

The office of Supreme Leader and the attendant organisation is the only really ideological component in the formation of Iranian foreign policy. This office does not operate in a political and institutional vacuum, however, but is networked with a well-structured foreign policy apparatus supported by modern research institutions. This apparatus is set up to promote a broad spectrum of opinions, thus almost always allowing Iranian decision-makers to choose between ideological and pragmatic concepts in foreign policy.

**36** On this see Wilfried Buchta, "The Failed Pan-Islamic Program of the Islamic Republic: Views of the Liberal Reformers of the Religious 'Semi-Opposition'," *Iran and the Surrounding World: Interactions in Culture and Cultural Politics*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Rudolph P. Matthee (Washington, D.C. 2002), 281–304.

# Ideology and Pragmatism in Iranian Foreign Policy

Iran's "Islamic ideology" is not so much a stringently formulated ideology in the true sense of the word as a mixture of different political takes on the world embracing nationalism, anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism, ideas adapted from Marxism, political Islam and traditional Shiite political thinking. The inherent contradictions between these components make it almost impossible to shape any kind of cohesive *realpolitik* out of them: political Islam of the Khomeini ilk and Third World thinking are both revolutionary doctrines that claim to be universally valid; nationalism and Shia on the other hand are, respectively, Iran or Shia-centred and are traditional and conservative.

## Overview

### Ideological and Theological Influences on the Foreign Policy of Iran

	Islamic	Secular
Revolutionary	Political Islam Khomeinism	Third World ideology
Conservative	Traditional Shia	Nationalism

Iranian diplomacy has exploited these contradictions in order to bring more pragmatism – and hence more latitude for itself – into foreign policy, and it emphasises certain ideological elements to suit its requirements:<sup>37</sup>

- ▶ With respect to its immediate neighbours Iranian foreign policy is guided by national interests and hence pragmatic. Strategic policy is concerned mainly with territorial integrity, national sovereignty and the economic development of Iran.
- ▶ Vis-à-vis the Islamic states in the region Iran underlines its Islamic revolutionary identity. In some cases, however, it must assume the role of a protective power for the Shiites in the region. A central policy focus in this sphere is defending Muslims, above all the Palestinians.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Mahmood Sariohghalam, *The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Persian) (Tehran, 2010), 69.

- ▶ With respect to the rest of the world Iran highlights its identity as a Third World state and promotes anti-imperialism.

## Revolutionary Foreign Policy in the Iranian Constitution and Its Consequences

Wherever the Iranian Constitution refers to foreign policy, the emphasis is always on the revolutionary aspects of the state ideology.<sup>38</sup> Otherwise the principle of political independence runs through the whole text of the Iranian constitution like a leitmotif.<sup>39</sup>

Thus Article 3, paragraph 16, calls for Iran to be guided in its foreign policy by "Islamic standards" and by the principles of its "fraternal obligation towards all Muslims and the unconditional protection of the world's oppressed". Article 11 invokes the unity of the Islamic religious community and commits the government to "conducting its entire policy on the basis of the friendship and concord of the Islamic nations and to continually striving to ... bring about the unity of the Islamic world". These calls are repeated in more explicit form in Section Ten, Foreign Policy (Articles 152–154) of the Constitution. Thus Article 153 confirms the ban on entering into agreements "that could give occasion for the establishment of foreign power positions in the areas of natural and economic resources, culture, the army and other affairs of the country". Alliances with "imperialist powers" are hence explicitly prohibited by Article 152. The same article stipulates that the constitution is valid beyond the state borders of Iran and asserts that the state of Iran must defend the rights of all Muslims. This obligation is reiterated in similar words in Article 154,

<sup>38</sup> Silvia Tellenbach, *Untersuchungen zur Verfassung der Islamischen Republik Iran vom 15. November 1979* (Berlin, 1985), 61–64; Asghar Schirazi, *The Constitution of Iran. Politics and the State in Iran* (London and New York, 1997); Yavuz Özoguz (ed.), *Verfassung der Islamischen Republik Iran* (Bremen, 2007), 21–24.

<sup>39</sup> Tellenbach, *Untersuchungen zur Verfassung* (see note 38), 231–35, and R. K. Ramazani, "Iran's Foreign Policy: Independence, Freedom and the Islamic Republic," *Iran's Foreign Policy. From Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, ed. Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Mahjoob Zweiri (Reading, 2008), 1–15.

which states that although the Islamic Republic will refrain from any interference in the internal affairs of other states, it nevertheless supports “the struggle of the oppressed (*mostazafan, mazlum*) to assert their rights vis-à-vis their oppressors (*mostakberin, zalem*) at any place in the world”. Here Iran articulates its claim that its own ideology is universally valid, and justifies this rather bold assertion by the fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran considers its goal to be “the happiness of people in all of human society”.<sup>40</sup>

The anti-imperialist orientation of the constitution and the revolutionary tradition form the basis for Iran’s *anti-Americanism* and *anti-Zionism* as important pillars of Iranian state ideology. Following the victorious revolution Tehran revised its *de facto* recognition of Israel and either froze or broke off relations with Islamic states that maintained normal relations with Israel (Morocco, Egypt, Jordan). These steps and Iran’s hostility to Israel were justified on the grounds of the obligation ensuing from the constitution to support the oppressed Palestinians. At the same time the Iranians maintain that their irreconcilable attitude to the Jewish state is not motivated by anti-Semitism and that hatred of the Jews is alien to them.<sup>41</sup>

Were Iran to take literally the idealistic promises in its constitution, including the assertion of the universal validity of its own ideology, then Tehran would be obliged to engage in a foreign policy of permanent revolution. In reality, however, Iran was able to realise these utopian demands only in the first phase after 1979, when the export of revolution and the dissemination of political Islam of the Khomeini stamp were indeed the central goals of its foreign policy. At the time, the long war against Iraq (1980–1988) was seen as part of a forthcoming great Islamic world revolution that would elevate the forces of political Islam to a real alternative to the opposing power blocs of the Cold War. These goals led Iran to adopt a strictly neutral position in the East-West conflict expressed in the slogan, “Neither East nor West – Islamic Republic”. Against this background it was only logical that Tehran diplomacy should attach much weight to Iran’s membership in the Non-Aligned Movement.

## Significance of the Non-aligned Movement

After the end of the Cold War, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), founded in 1961<sup>42</sup> by important states like India, Egypt, Brazil and Argentina, was largely forgotten in the West. For Iran, however, it remained important for two reasons: first, because Iran is insufficiently integrated in the institutional structures of international relations; and second, because the elites in Tehran believed that in the NAM they would receive the recognition denied them by part of the international community.

Some groups in Tehran emphasise the ideological significance of the movement.<sup>43</sup> According to them the non-aligned states and developing countries are no longer threatened by imperialism in the classical sense but instead by “neo-imperialism,” by which they mean cultural and economic dependence on the West. They maintain that NAM countries have an obligation to change power relations all over the world, for example in the UN, to their advantage. Vice-president Mohammad Reza Rahimi sees the NAM of the future as a political bloc in its own right in a multipolar world that will join ranks to put up a united front to defy the West. Currently, he asserts, the movement is looking for a “standard bearer” – a role for which he believes Iran would be suitable.<sup>44</sup> Hence Tehran sees itself as the leader of a “Third World bloc”.

Nevertheless, the significance of the NAM is actually a subject of some controversy in Iran. Sceptics criticise the low degree of institutionalisation and the lack of cooperation within the organisation, and Iran was particularly offended by the lack of support for Tehran’s candidacy as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in 2008.

The conference of the NAM in Tehran in August 2012, at which Iran took over the chair from Egypt, for the first time in decades received prominent coverage in the international media, thus giving Iran a rare opportunity to present itself as part of the international public sphere. The reason for the unusual amount of attention was major pressure on the part of Israel and the United States to boycott the conference, and which

<sup>40</sup> Tellenbach, *Untersuchungen zur Verfassung* (see note 38), 101; Özoguz, *Verfassung* (see note 38), 65.

<sup>41</sup> Homeyra Moshirizadeh and Ehsan Mesbah, “The Case of Israel in the Political Discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran” (Persian), *Ravabet-e Khareji*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 2011), 245–70.

<sup>42</sup> See <http://www.csstc.org>.

<sup>43</sup> Hamid-Reza Mahdavi, “The Non-aligned Movement and the Need to Change Its Foundations” (Persian), *Seraje Basiji* 76 (December 2009/January 2010): 55–64.

<sup>44</sup> Mohammad Bagher Khorramshad, “What Role Do the Non-aligned Play in the Emerging New World Order?” (Persian), *Borhan*, August 30, 2012; “NAM-members Seek Flag Bearer for US Hegemony,” *Khabar Online*, September 3, 2012.



culminated in a polemic against the traditional participation of the UN secretary general in the meeting as well as that of other heads of state and government, specifically Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Egyptian Prime Minister Mohammad Morsi.<sup>45</sup> Iranian politicians were not alone in interpreting the failure of this boycott campaign as proof of the United States' inability to isolate Iran.

Despite the summit going ahead as planned, it was also the scene of some discord. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon once again raised the subject of the Holocaust conference, while Mohammad Morsi opened his speech by praising the four Sunni Califs, which constituted an affront to radical Shiites. His subsequent harsh criticism of the Syrian government was deliberately wrongly translated. The Western media gave prominent coverage to these frictions, yet the impression they created did not tally with the one the participants had, for the Egyptians confined themselves to lodging energetic protests. Thus in Tehran the NAM conference was chalked up as a major success for Iran,<sup>46</sup> even if the members of the NAM did not profess any support for the Syrian regime, as the Iranian government had perhaps hoped it would.<sup>47</sup>

The Iranian elites conclude from Iran's membership in the NAM that Iran is integrated in and respected by the "real" world community.<sup>48</sup> The conferences of the NAM hence serve the Islamic Republic as an "ersatz global public sphere." Above and beyond this Tehran tacitly assumes that all member states of the NAM share Iran's anti-imperialist stance. The meetings of the NAM are documented in detail in the Iranian media and serve to consolidate the anti-imperialist and anti-American position of the regime, making it more difficult to reach any understanding with the West. Nevertheless, the decision-makers in Tehran

have made repeated attempts to change Iran's relationship with the United States.

## Anti-Americanism

After radical Islamists stormed the US embassy in Tehran (1979) and took diplomatic personnel hostage (1979–1980) the United States broke off relations with revolutionary Iran. The opposition between the United States and Iran has since then been a strategic constant in the region and anti-Americanism has become a defining paradigm of Iranian foreign policy.<sup>49</sup>

## Economic Contacts and the "Grand Bargain"

Despite breaking off diplomatic relations, Iran and the United States maintained economic contacts for many years after that. In the early 1980s, in the critical phase of the revolution in other words, the United States was still the largest purchaser of Iranian oil. It was not until the "Iran Libya Sanctions Act" of 1996 that Washington curtailed its trading relations with Tehran, and even then food and medicines remained exempt from the sanctions until the middle of 2012. The United States was thus for a long time Iran's most important supplier of wheat.<sup>50</sup>

Advocates of US-Iranian rapprochement in both countries were able repeatedly to voice their views. It is probably thanks to these people that the two sides were able to keep open low-profile channels of communication known as track two diplomacy. In May 2003 an Iranian memorandum was made public which formulated the chief points of possible cooperation between the United States and Iran. The authors of this paper outlined possible arrangements for cooperation in the field of terrorism, an agreement on the transparency of Iran's nuclear program and recognition of the two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. But the main import of this document was its detailed timetable for confidence-building measures whereby the Iranians were prepared to make concessions in return for the lifting of US sanctions. The initiative for this so-called "grand bargain" apparently

<sup>45</sup> Rick Gladstone, "U.N. Visit Will Set Back a Push to Isolate Iran," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2012; Gabe Fischer, "Jerusalem Lobbying Countries to Boycott Non-Aligned Conference in Tehran," *The Times of Israel*, August 2, 2012.

<sup>46</sup> Gudrun Harrer, "Blockfreie in Tehran: die Rechnung ohne den Gast," *Der Standard*, August 30, 2012; Dilip Hiro, "Non-Aligned Summit Belies Isolation of Iran," *Yale Global Online*, September 4, 2012.

<sup>47</sup> *Final Document [of the] 16th Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM 2012/Doc.1/Rev2)* (Tehran, August 31, 2012), <http://nam.gov.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=212cfdbf6dbc4185-a4f5-01fe30a0c772>.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran Preparing to Lead Global Non-aligned Group," *The New York Times*, August 14, 2012; Rudolph Chimelli, "Gleichgesinnte willkommen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 20, 2012.

<sup>49</sup> Wilfried Buchta, "Iran," *Anti-Americanism in the Islamic World*, ed. Sigrid Faath (Hamburg, 2006): 165–82.

<sup>50</sup> The last sale of US wheat to Iran, to the tune of at least 46 million dollars, took place at the beginning of 2012. On this see Emily Stephenson, "Iran Buys US Wheat despite Nuclear Tensions," *Reuters*, March 1, 2012.

came from the Iranian government, the memorandum probably having been prepared in consultation with the Supreme Leader. The Swiss ambassador communicated it to the Americans, but the Bush administration rejected the Iranian overtures, probably reading them as a sign of weakness.<sup>51</sup>

### Lifting the Taboo on Relations with the United States

Nevertheless, in mid-2008 the United States modified its previously harsh attitude, offering in the context of the E3+3 format an extensive cooperation package to Iran. What is more, US Secretary of State at the time Condoleezza Rice together with the foreign ministers of the other five states involved in the dialogue signed a letter presented personally by Javier Solana to Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki inviting Iran to cooperate with the international community.<sup>52</sup> The reactions of the Iranian leadership were restrained and ultimately negative. Evidently Tehran for its part now interpreted this letter as an admission of American weakness and thus allowed another chance to pass by. The Iranians then waited for the election of the new US president at the end of 2008, but without having any plan for the event that the successor to George W. Bush would adopt a more conciliatory policy towards Iran. All the greater the surprise in Tehran, then, at the message that the new US president, Barack H. Obama, addressed directly to the Iranian people to mark the occasion of the Persian New Year.<sup>53</sup> On 25 March 2009 Supreme Leader Khamenei responded in Mashhad.<sup>54</sup> While not refraining from provocative Islamic rhetoric, he for the first time portrayed rela-

tions with the United States in terms of opposing political interests rather than as a clash of ideologies. Khamenei thus cautiously lifted the taboo on the issue of *normalising relations with the United States*. Only then was Ahmadinezhad able to undertake an – ultimately unsuccessful – attempt to improve the relationship with the United States. There were two main reasons why he failed: pressure from radical splinter groups and the fact that Iran had yet to officially renounce its anti-Americanism.

This change of paradigm in foreign policy away from anti-Americanism can only be accomplished by Khamenei. The logic of statesmanship would suggest this as an obvious step, as occasional instances of US-Iranian cooperation show, testifying to a pragmatic approach on the Iranian side.

### Pragmatism (maslahat) as a Main Operational Principle

Even while the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) was still raging the Iranian elites were forced to recognise that a foreign policy based on ideology alone was not tenable and would do the country more harm than good. Internally it was difficult to win acceptance for the transition to more realism; first the influence of extremist elements – which had been going it alone in the export of revolution – had to be eliminated. After Khomeini accepted the UN Security Council's ceasefire resolution 598 in 1988 and Rafsanjani and Khamenei assumed office, respectively, as president and Supreme Leader in 1990, the phase of aggressively ideological or utopian foreign policy came to an end. Since then pragmatism, professionalism and national interests have come to the fore, but of course without ideology being abandoned as a frame of reference.<sup>55</sup> The foreign policy maxim now became expediency (*maslahat*), whereby the regime put the benefits for the nation (and itself) ahead of ideological orthodoxy. Since Khomeini's death (1989) the Iranian leadership has only once, in 1998, in connection with the cancellation of a planned military intervention in Afghanistan, referred explicitly to the *maslahat* principle. In a sober cost-benefit calculation it decided against the plans of the military whose exit strategy the government did not find convincing.

51 Nicholas D. Kristof, "Diplomacy at Its Worst," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2007; the text of the "Guldimann Memorandum," named after the Swiss ambassador Tehran, who delivered the memorandum to the Americans, and his accompanying letter can be found in Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance. The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the US* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 341–46; François Heisbourg, *Iran, le choix des armes?* (Paris, 2007), 93–96.

52 On the significance of this offer in the context of European relations with Iran see Walter Posch, "The EU and Iran," in *The Routledge Handbook of European Security*, ed. Sven Biscop and Richard Whitman (London, 2013): 179–88.

53 Ian Black, "Barack Obama Offers Iran New Beginning with Video Message," *The Guardian*, March 20, 2009, see also <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/20/barack-obama-video-iran>.

54 See the video recording of his speech with English subtitles under: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t\\_oAHcsYqls](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_oAHcsYqls).

55 Gary Sick, "A Revolution in Transition," in Keddie and Matthee (eds.), *Iran and the Surrounding World* (see note 36): 355–74.

Tehran has gone surprisingly far in pursuing this *maslahat* principle, even to the extent of cooperating with Israel. During the Iran-Iraq war what was known disparagingly in the official language as the “Zionist construct” became one of the most important suppliers of arms and medicine and also bought Iranian oil – with the knowledge of Revolutionary Leader Khomeini. This cooperation continued under Rafsanjani and similar, mostly secret deals have been concluded with influential Israeli business people until very recently.<sup>56</sup>

There is no doubt that the expediency principle has done much to bring about a de-escalation of Iranian foreign policy. Yet for all its political pragmatism, *maslahat* does not mean the overcoming of ideology but at most its containment. In many cases Tehran justifies or inflates changes in policy direction in ideological terms, sometimes even underpinning them with a decree from the Supreme Leader (*hokm-e hokumati*). Thus there is some evidence that although *maslahat* may be being used to overcome ideological orthodoxy in foreign policy, this moderation in the foreign policy sphere is balanced with a hardening of dogmatic positions in other areas, for instance in domestic policy. Moreover, even in foreign policy the *maslahat* principle is not associated with a de-ideologisation in the true sense of the word. Some authors therefore take the view that ultimately there is nothing to suggest that Iran is giving economic development and the integration of the country in the global economy priority over the state ideology and that the doctrinaire approach is unlikely to be overcome because the elites obviously have no interest in this.<sup>57</sup> A more likely scenario, they believe, is that idealistic-

ideological and pragmatic-realistic phases in foreign policy will simply alternate.<sup>58</sup>

The following three cases illustrate how ideology and pragmatism or expediency (*maslahat*) are roughly balanced out in Iranian foreign policy, suggesting a need always to pay heed to both *realpolitik* and ideology. Conspicuous is how much foreign policy emphases vary depending on what is at stake: in Central Asia and Afghanistan the Iranians are guided primarily by their national interests; in the nuclear programme the world order and strategic benefits play a large role; and vis-à-vis the Middle East and the Persian Gulf the Iranian approach is mainly motivated by Islamic and nationalist considerations.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Ammann, *The King of Oil. The Secret Lives of Marc Rich* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2009), 92–104, 207f.; Barak Ravid and Jonathan Lis, “Knesset Panel on Ofer Brothers' Iran Dealings Adjourns after Chair Receives ‘Secret Note’,” *Haaretz*, June 1, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> S. J. Dehghani-Firouzabadi, “Emancipating Foreign Policy: Critical Theory and Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy,” *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 3 (Summer 2008), 1–26. Mahmood Sariolghalam, “Sources of Continuity in Iran's Foreign Policy,” unpublished Manuscript (Presentation at the National University, Singapore, May 19, 2011), and ibidem, “The Understanding of Power and the Function of Foreign Policy: A Comparison between China and Iran (Persian),” in *Ravabet-e Khareji*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 49–74.

<sup>58</sup> Hamid Ahmadi, “The Dilemma of National Interest in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Iran in the 21st Century. Politics, Economics and Conflict*, ed. Homa Katouzian and Hossein Shahidi (London, 2008): 28–40, especially 34f.

## Central Asia and Afghanistan: Economics and Security

Iranian regional policy vis-à-vis the post-Soviet Central Asian states is interest-oriented and pragmatic.<sup>59</sup> Both in the Karabakh conflict and in the Tajik civil war the Iranians proved capable of consigning ethnic, confessional and ideological considerations to the back burner, as demonstrated by their support for Christian Armenia in the Karabakh conflict and by Iranian cooperation with Russia against Islamic forces in Tajikistan. Iran has taken a similarly pragmatic approach in its policy towards Afghanistan, even if it has derived support mainly from Shiite groups.

While Iran's relations with most Central Asian and Caucasian states are unproblematic, a number of unresolved questions pose potential sources of conflict. These include the legal status of the Caspian Sea, on which authorisation to exploit important gas reserves depends,<sup>60</sup> and the dispute about water usage rights for the Helmand and Harirud Rivers, which originate in Afghanistan and flow into Iran.<sup>61</sup> Tehran considers Afghanistan's use of water higher up the rivers for development projects such as hydroelectric power stations and irrigation as an unfriendly act.

The most delicate relationship, however, is that with Azerbaijan,<sup>62</sup> since Baku accuses the Iranians of supporting both Armenia and Islamic extremists. The Iranians for their part perceive the secular nature and Western orientation of the Caucasus republic as a threat, and Baku is generally suspected by Tehran of encouraging separatism among Iranian Azerbaijanis. The Iranian leadership feels particularly provoked by Azerbaijan's good relations with Israel and the cooperation between the two states in the energy sector and in the fields of high technology and security.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Qavam Sharabyani, *Iranian Security and the Role of Asia in Central Asia* (Persian) (Tehran, 2007), 314.

<sup>60</sup> Bahador Zarei, *An Overview of Iranian Foreign Policy in the Geopolitically Important Regions of the Caspian Sea and South Asia* (Persian) (Tehran, 2006), especially 3–57; Mark N. Katz, "Russia and Iran," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Autumn 2012), 54–64, 55.

<sup>61</sup> Nasser Saghafi-Ameri and Afsane Ahadi, *Iran and the Policy of the "View to the East"* (Persian), (Tehran, 2008), 97.

<sup>62</sup> Uwe Halbach, *Irans nördliche Nachbarschaft. Kaukasische Ängste vor einer Eskalation des Atomstreits*, Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2012 (SWP-Aktuell 22/2012).

<sup>63</sup> Michel Makinsky, "Azerbaïdjan – Israël: Des intérêts bien compris," *Euro-Orient* 28 (2008): 97–130.

### Iran as a Geo-economic Hub

The real aim of Iranian regional policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia including Afghanistan is the economic integration of the region of which Iran would then form the centre. A first step in this direction was the founding in 1985 of the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO). Its members include almost all the former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia (apart from Georgia and Armenia) as well as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey. One of the ECO's goals is the expansion of transport routes between the member states as a means of furthering trade. The Iranians are certainly aware of the limited possibilities for cooperation and the major obstacles involved in creating an "ECO-area", but Tehran believes there is no alternative to regional cooperation.<sup>64</sup>

### International Transit Routes and Gas Pipelines

The Iranian leadership would like to make the country a hub for energy supply lines and transit routes for Europe, Russia and the Middle East on the one hand and Central Asia, China and the Indian subcontinent on the other. Thus together with Russia and India Iran is promoting a project to build an *international north-south railway corridor*<sup>65</sup> intended to connect the Caspian Sea with the Persian Gulf. A similar project has been conceived to link the land-locked Central Asian states with the Persian Gulf. India seems to have the greatest interest in the rapid realisation of these projects, and

<sup>64</sup> Elahe Kulayi, *ECO and Regional Cooperation* (Persian) (Tehran, 2000), 103–105, and Elahe Kulayi and Mohammad Mo'addab, "The Status and Significance of Iran in the Energy Market of the ECO" (Persian), *Ravabet-e Khareji*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 33–54.

<sup>65</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), *Development of the Trans-Asian Railway*, New York 2001 (ST/ESCAP/2182), [http://www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TIS\\_pubs/pub\\_2182/tarnsfulltext.pdf](http://www.unescap.org/ttdw/Publications/TIS_pubs/pub_2182/tarnsfulltext.pdf); Islamic Republic of Iran, Ministry of Roads and Transportation, *Railway Transportation* (Tehran, 2010), <http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/trans/doc/2010/wp5/ECE-TRANS-WP5-GE2-05-pres12e.pdf>.

New Delhi recently exerted pressure on Iran to close the last remaining gaps in the Iranian railway network.<sup>66</sup>

More significant from an economic and strategic point of view, however, is the Iranian plan to win China, India and Europe as markets for Iranian gas. In 2001, towards the end of the second Khatami presidency, the EU still saw the Iranian gas reserves as an attractive alternative to Russian gas. Indeed, the European Commission at that time expressly recommended the expansion of energy relations.<sup>67</sup> But with the escalation of the nuclear issue, which by 2005 had come to dominate relations between Europe and Iran, this option was shelved. The *Nabucco project*, designed to transport Iranian and Iraqi gas via Turkey and the Balkans to Central Europe as an alternative to Russian gas provides a good illustration.<sup>68</sup> In 2010, namely, *Nabucco Pipelines International* cancelled plans to lay a third pipeline along the Iranian-Turkish border, thus signalling the end of any further expansion plans in the direction of Iran for the foreseeable future.<sup>69</sup>

In the wake of these developments Iran began to attach greater importance to the eastern pipeline project (Iran–Pakistan–India, IPI) to bring Iranian gas to Pakistan and India. IPI is associated with hopes that a shared interest in regional stability would help to quell Indian-Pakistani rivalry (hence the original name Peace Pipeline). Pakistan and Iran had already signed preliminary agreements in 1995 and in 2003 an Iranian-Pakistani working group was formed, followed two years later by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding to include India in the project. Although India withdrew again in 2007, Iran and Pakistan concluded further agreements in 2009 and 2010.<sup>70</sup> The Indian decision to withdraw from the

project is generally attributed to pressure from the United States. However, Iranian diplomats believe that India was simply trying to bring down the price of Iranian gas, leading Tehran to hope that India will rejoin the project at some point.<sup>71</sup>

### Economic Strategy

The importance of the transit routes and gas pipelines for the economic future of Iran should not be underestimated. How much store Tehran sets by this *realpolitik* based on economic interests is demonstrated by an economic strategy paper envisaging Iran as a reliable energy supplier of the future – the only strategy paper Iran has ever formulated as a binding document.<sup>72</sup> The principles articulated in the “20-Year Perspective of the Islamic Republic of Iran” are not free of ideological rhetoric,<sup>73</sup> yet the central message is an economic one, thus for the first time putting the goals of growth and prosperity on a par with the radical ideals laid down as the guiding principles of the constitution. This signifies more than just pragmatism or expediency (*maslahat*), for which ideological positions would not need to be forfeited, and constitutes a real prioritisation of national interests over revolutionary axioms in foreign policy. Iran’s ambitions to expand transport routes and gas pipelines is, however, only possible in a secure environment. Here Iranian interests converge with those of the West, above all the United States, which has just as little to gain from chaos and the failure of states in the region as Iran does.

### Afghanistan

This convergence of interests was certainly strong enough for the Islamic Republic of Iran to cooperate with the United States against the Taliban around the turn of the year 2001/02. Their cooperation was sus-

<sup>66</sup> Sandeep Diksheet, “Despite U.S. Opposition, Iran to Be Transport Hub for North-South Corridor,” *The Hindu*, May 31, 2012; Debiddatta Aurobinda Mahaprata, “The North South Corridor: Prospects of Multilateral Trade in Eurasia,” in *Russia and India Report*, March 14, 2012; Sokhbet Mamedov, “The Iranian Project,” *Russia and India Report*, February 21, 2011.

<sup>67</sup> European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council – EU Relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran*, COM (2001)71 final, Brussels, February 7, 2001.

<sup>68</sup> Heinz Kramer, *Die Türkei als Energiedrehscheibe. Wunschtraum und Wirklichkeit*, SWP-Studie 9/2010 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2010), 20–25 and 31–33.

<sup>69</sup> See the press released by Nabucco Gas-Pipeline: “Nabucco: Modification of Feeder Line Concept,” August 23, 2010, [http://www.nabucco-pipeline.com/portal/page/portal/en/press/NewsText?p\\_item\\_id=8E79E5BF557DCC2DE040A8C0010178CA](http://www.nabucco-pipeline.com/portal/page/portal/en/press/NewsText?p_item_id=8E79E5BF557DCC2DE040A8C0010178CA).

<sup>70</sup> See the introduction to the collection of material by Noor ul Haq and Muhammad Nawaz Khan, *Iran-Pakistan Peace Pipe-*

*line* (Islamabad, 2010), <http://ipripak.org/factfiles/ff124.pdf>; Abbas Maleki, *Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline: Is It a Peace Pipeline? Audit of the Conventional Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Center for International Studies, September 2007).

<sup>71</sup> “India Considering Returning to Iranian Gas,” *Tehran Times*, April 9, 2012.

<sup>72</sup> *Document of the 20-Year Strategy* (Persian), <http://www.dolat.ir/PDF/20years.pdf>.

<sup>73</sup> A critical analysis of this programme is offered by Jahan-gir Amuzegar, “Iran’s 20-years Economic Perspective,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn 2009): 41–57.

pended, however, following President Bush's famous State of the Union speech, in which he described Iran as part of an "axis of evil". Even then, though, Iran continued to be involved in the Afghanistan question as an indirect cooperation partner of the West, participating in the most important international forums for the stabilisation of Afghanistan. To this end Iran has since 2011 been an active member of the *Istanbul Process*, which builds on the "Kabul Declaration of Good Neighbourly Relations" from the year 2002<sup>74</sup> and includes all of Afghanistan's neighbours. At the "Heart of Asia" ministers' conference in Kabul in June 2012 the participants in the Istanbul Process<sup>75</sup> agreed on a series of confidence-building measures in which interested states can participate. These include measures for disaster protection, combating terrorism, combating the drugs trade, creating a joint chamber of commerce, economic expansion, and regional infrastructure, education and training projects, hence covering the Iranians' most important interests in Afghanistan. Iran is already one of the biggest investors in Afghanistan and one of its chief trading partners. Added to this are Iranian soft powers in the sphere of education, primarily for Shiite and Persian-speaking groups.<sup>76</sup> Tehran's cultural influence is exerted less through state institutions than through religious channels; most educational facilities are run by Qom clergy who have already built up local circles of support allowing Iranian sponsors to remain in the background.

Tehran is also seeking to improve its bilateral relations with Afghanistan. The two states work closely together on the refugee issue<sup>77</sup> and in fighting the drugs trade, and many agreements have already been signed in these fields. Iran would like to intensify cooperation on security policy still further in order to

prevent a comeback of the Taliban and other similarly radical Sunni groups.<sup>78</sup> So far this has been prevented by the United States, which strives to impose political limits on the Afghans in their relationship with Iran.

Tehran tries to respond to pressure in Afghanistan with counter-pressure, for example in the form of IRGC, specifically the Qods brigade. This strategy includes supplying arms to anti-Western groups, including to former members of the Taliban, a measure with which Iran responded to the establishment of Western contacts with Taliban groups.<sup>79</sup> Iranian arms supplies as a rule remain below a certain provocation threshold; they do not, for example, include ground-to-air missiles, while control of the supplies ensures a certain predictability.<sup>80</sup> Basically this is about sending political signals to the Americans, who are suspected by Tehran of using Afghanistan to support radical Sunni separatists in eastern Iran, rather than about building strategic partnerships. Ultimately, neither the Iranians nor the Americans are in a position to drive the other out of Afghanistan.

This situation will not change even after the NATO mission to Afghanistan ends as planned in 2014, since several thousand US soldiers will remain stationed there. With this in mind, Western analysts and politicians have repeatedly called for a Western-Iranian partnership on the Afghanistan issue.<sup>81</sup> The Iranians already demonstrated in 2001/02 that they are capable of engaging in constructive cooperation with the West. Whether they are prepared to do this again depends on many factors, including progress on the nuclear issue, which currently dominates Iranian relations with the West.

<sup>74</sup> Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Declaration of the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan*, November 3, 2011, <http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/4598>.

<sup>75</sup> "Afghanistan Hosts Second 'Heart of Asia' Conference," *Tolnews*, June 14, 2012; "Heart of Asia" Ministerial Conference, *Declaration* (Kabul, June 14, 2012), <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/620128/publicationFile/169405/120612-HeartOfAsia-Konferenzzerklarung.pdf>.

<sup>76</sup> Frederick W. Kagan et al., *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan*, (Washington, D.C.: The American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War, May 2012), 79–81.

<sup>77</sup> On the Afghan refugee problem see Banafsheh Sahm-Gis, "Uninvited Guests. This Hospitality Has Been Going on for 31 Years!" (Persian), *Hamshahri-Mah* (October 2010): 112–17.

<sup>78</sup> Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi, *Iran and the Policy of the "View to the East"* (see note 61), 94–96.

<sup>79</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, "Taliban Suspend Talks with US as Karzai Calls for Troops to Leave Village," *The Guardian*, March 15, 2012; Julian Borger, "Taliban to Open Political Office in Qatar," *The Guardian*, January 3, 2012.

<sup>80</sup> The following is based on Eric Parks, *Iranian Weapons Smuggling Activities in Afghanistan* (unclassified) (Washington, D.C.: Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization [JIEDDO], September 3, 2009), 2–5, <http://info.publicintelligence.net/JIEDDO-IranWeaponsSmuggling.pdf>.

<sup>81</sup> Markus Potzel, *Iran und der Westen. Chancen für gemeinsames Handeln in Afghanistan?* SWP-Studie 16/2010 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, June 2010); Mir H. Sadat and James P. Hughes, "U.S.-Iranian Engagement through Afghanistan," *Middle East Policy*, vol. 17, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 31–51.

## Third World Rhetoric and Power Projections: Iran's Nuclear Program

The Iranian elites regard nuclear technology as the most important and most modern form of technology. This typically Third World attitude to technology has formed the basis for the Iranian negotiating position with the E3 (Great Britain, France, and Germany) and more recently with the E3+3 (plus USA, China and Russia) as well. In order to win backing for its position both internally and in the foreign policy arena, Tehran emphasises the peaceful nature of the Iranian nuclear program and the importance of the International Atomic Energy Organisation (IAEA) under whose auspices Iran was for a long time able to count on the support of many developing countries. Above all, Iran interprets the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as meaning that it has an inalienable "right to the nuclear fuel cycle",<sup>82</sup> in other words to the technology that is a prerequisite for a nuclear weapons programme.<sup>83</sup> This is the interpretation espoused by most Third World countries, but few of them go so far as to risk an international confrontation.

### "Nuclear Justice"

With respect to the nuclear issue Iran sees itself as a champion of the Third World, which "in reality" constitutes a majority in the international community.<sup>84</sup> Supreme Leader Khamenei asserted in January 2007 in a programmatic speech in Mashhad<sup>85</sup> that Iran is not isolated, as the United States claims.

<sup>82</sup> For a summary of the Iranian position see Nasser Saghafi-Ameri, "Iran: The Paradigm of 'Non-Weapon Nuclear States (NWNS)'," (Tehran: IMESS, September 16, 2012), <http://en.merc.ir/default.aspx?tabid=98&ArticleId=461>.

<sup>83</sup> Shahram Chubin expressly emphasised this point in *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 2006). Oli Heinonen, "The Rocky Road of Nuclear Diplomacy with Iran," *Arms Control Today*, vol. 42, no. 6 (July/August 2012), 8–9.

<sup>84</sup> Typical of this way of thinking is the following article: Rasul Sanayi-Rad, "Reasons for the West's Position against the Nuclear Programme of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (Persian), *Misaq-e Basij-e Motakhasseesin* (April 13, 2011): 88–113.

<sup>85</sup> Khamenei's speech in January 2007; the video recording with English subtitles can be accessed under <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CdC5NB-ait0>.

Rather, he said that the "absolute majority of states" – referring to the non-aligned and Islamic states – welcomed Iran's nuclear enrichment program and admired Iran's courage in trying to wrest the technology for producing "nuclear energy from the firm grip of a small group of arrogant powers".

Apart from the obvious attempt to argue away Iran's de facto isolation, this position certainly illustrates a fundamental view of the world that the Iranian elite shares with large parts of the population. Primarily it is about "standing firm" and preventing rights to which Iran is entitled and the achievements of its own scientists being denied. This is why Iran insists on its right to enrich uranium and to use technology that it has itself created up till now, a position in which it feels confirmed by the "true" international community.<sup>86</sup> Until now Tehran has simply taken the support of major Third World states such as India and Brazil for granted, despite changing parameters. When the West tried to woo the non-aligned states, the clear dividing line in voting on the Board of Governors of the IAEA between the "arrogant nuclear powers" and the Third World, whose standard-bearer Iran had declared itself, ceased to exist for a time.<sup>87</sup> Other states used Iran's stubbornness to promote their own national interests. India, for example, reached a nuclear agreement with the United States in 2008.<sup>88</sup>

Yet since 2006 the Iranian nuclear dossier has been with the Security Council, and negotiations are being conducted with the EU, or to be more precise under the auspices of the E3+3 format. Not only have the members of this format kept a unified position but they have initiated a series of sanctions, which via UN Resolution 1929 of June 2010, have been tightened almost to the point of an economic war.

A few months before the resolution was issued Brazil and Turkey launched an initiative on the

<sup>86</sup> "Iran Will Not Concede Its Right to Uranium Enrichment Up to 20 Percent" (Persian), *Fararu*, March 25, 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Heisbourg, *Iran, le choix des armes?* (see note 51), 110.

<sup>88</sup> Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi, *Iran and the Policy of the "View to the East"* (see note 61), 119–23 and 274–76. For an official American portrayal see Geoffrey Pyatt, "Taking Stock of the U.S.-India Nuclear Deal," September 30, 2011, <http://www.state.gov/p/psa/rls/rmks/2011/174883.htm>.

nuclear question that constituted one of the most explicit attempts to date to play the Third World card on the international stage. Opinions differ about how exactly this initiative came about.<sup>89</sup> But one of the reasons why it failed was that it was debated in public, prompting the Iranian leadership to turn this diplomatic foray into an anti-imperialist gesture. In so doing Tehran not only deliberately ignored the sensibilities of the Europeans involved in the E3+3 dialogue, but also risked bruising the status- and reputation-conscious states China and Russia, which as permanent members of the World Security Council were of course also responsible for the policy of sanctions. What is more, Iran ultimately misunderstood the intentions of the governments in Ankara and Brasilia, both of which were seeking to establish their countries as emerging powers by casting themselves as modern constructive actors on the world political scene whose diplomacy would succeed where that of the Europeans failed.<sup>90</sup>

After the failure of this mediation attempt in 2010, Iran seemed to have become even more isolated politically. That changed with the *Declaration of Tehran* in August 2012<sup>91</sup> in which the non-aligned states expressly declared their support for the right of all states, including Iran, to use nuclear enrichment technology. While the United States sharply criticised the declaration,<sup>92</sup> Tehran received further support during the UN General Assembly from Venezuela and – surprisingly – from Argentina. Argentinean Foreign Minister Timerman stated that the best way to combat proliferation was total nuclear disarmament and that attempts to combat nuclear terrorism should not be used to restrict the legitimate ambitions of sovereign states to possess nuclear energy and achieve nuclear independence. Although it is unlikely that the Argentine-Iranian nuclear cooperation of the 1980s and 1990s will be resumed, this episode is nonetheless signifi-

cant, because Tehran sees its position confirmed internationally by the stance taken by Argentina and the non-aligned countries on the nuclear question and will thus enter the next round of E3+3 negotiations with renewed self-confidence.<sup>93</sup>

## Strategic Aspects

Harnessing the Third World discourse to argue in favour of the Iranian nuclear program serves above all to legitimate this program, both internally and internationally. A belief in progress and energy policy considerations are not, however, in themselves sufficient to justify the level of international confrontation Iran is prepared to engage in to defend its projects. The main reason Iran is sticking to this position is because of the strategic implications of what in the official language is termed a “peaceful nuclear energy program”.

In December 2001 Ayatollah Rafsanjani speculated that putting nuclear warheads in the hands of Muslims would thwart the “strategy of the imperialists”, since one warhead would be sufficient to wipe out Israel, whereas in the event of a counterstrike the Islamic world would “only” suffer damage.<sup>94</sup> This did not necessarily mean Rafsanjani was calling for an Iranian atomic bomb. His statement revealed, however, that the strategic goal Iran was pursuing with its nuclear activities was to achieve nuclear parity with Israel, whereby the Muslim world with its demographic potential and strategic significance would have the upper hand. In January 2010 parliamentary speaker Larijani stated openly that the Iranian nuclear programme was intended not only to supply Iran with energy but also to enhance its prestige in the region. Finally we should recall that when Iran re-embarked on a nuclear programme in the early 1990s it did so in a bid to pacify the military, which, following the end of the war with Iraq, was having to contend with the consequences of demobilisation and a sinking defence budget. A rudimentary nuclear program is after all cheaper than a systematic modernisation of the entire armed forces. This temporal coincidence fuelled the

<sup>89</sup> On this see Meir Javedanfar, “What the Iran Deal Is Missing,” *The Diplomat*, May 18, 2010.

<sup>90</sup> Kadir Üstün, “Turkey’s Iran Policy: Between Diplomacy and Sanctions,” *Insight Turkey* 12, vol. 3 (Summer 2010): 19–26.

<sup>91</sup> *Tehran Declaration. The Declaration of the XVI Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Non-Aligned Movement*, NAM 2012, Doc. 7 (Tehran, August 30/31, 2012) <http://nam.gov.ir/Portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=6d1ea997-6620-465d-881c-e4f64970415b>; Alain Frachon, “La ‘bombe’ iranienne et le sommet de Téhéran,” *Le Monde*, September 14, 2012.

<sup>92</sup> David Albright and Andrea Stricker, “NAM Countries Hypocritical on Iran,” *The Iran Primer* (blog), September 7, 2012, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2012/sep/07/nam-countries-hypocritical-iran>.

<sup>93</sup> “Iran’s Position in Dialogue with 5+1 Has Changed since NAM Summit,” *Mehr News Agency*, September 15, 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, “Deter and Contain: Dealing with a Nuclear Iran,” in *Getting Ready for a Nuclear-ready Iran*, ed. Patrick Clawson and Henry Sokolski (Washington, D.C.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2005): 225–55 (232).



suspicion that the programme did indeed have a military dimension.<sup>95</sup>

Nowadays the consensus among researchers is that Iran is primarily striving for nuclear weapons capability, but there is still disagreement about whether it is planning to actually acquire nuclear weapons. Most researchers believe this is not the case, because nuclear weapons *capability* would be sufficient to earn Tehran a level of prestige and influence vis-à-vis the Arab Gulf States that would force them to recognise Iran as a “virtual nuclear power”.<sup>96</sup> This would, however, still not be sufficient to achieve the desired strategic parity with Israel,<sup>97</sup> a goal that could be more easily reached via multilateral disarmament. For this reason Iran is supporting all efforts to establish a weapons of mass destruction-free zone in the Middle East, no matter whether this is initiated by Egypt, the Arab League or certain member states of the EU. This is the context in which we should view Tehran's support for the Egyptian demand that Israel join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and allow its nuclear facilities to be inspected by the IAEA. Iran thus sets great store by not acting alone but in an international framework, as the final communiqué of the non-aligned conference signalled.<sup>98</sup> In order to underscore their own credibility, the Iranians in 2010 and 2011 organised two disarmament conferences in Tehran entitled “Nuclear energy for everyone, nuclear weapons for no one”. In the West these conferences were largely ignored, but in the region and among the non-aligned states they prompted a degree of interest. At the same time, the Iranians repeatedly emphasise the importance of a *fatwa* issued by Khamenei that would prohibit the production, storage and deployment of nuclear weapons. The West is sceptical about the impact of a religious decree of this kind,<sup>99</sup> especially as its significance would be negligible in terms of international law.

Ultimately Iran is pursuing a double strategy: while steadily expanding its own nuclear programme to the point of nuclear weapons capability, thus ensuring itself breakout capability, it supports any measure suitable for containing the Israeli nuclear program. Remaining a party to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty is a prerequisite for both goals: to increase the diplomatic pressure on Israel and to secure and legitimise its own programme through cooperation with the IAEA. In a Middle East free of weapons of mass destruction the “virtual nuclear power” Iran would then have sufficient weight to bolster its claim for regional leadership.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, “The Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An Assessment,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 1 (March 2001): 13–30.

<sup>96</sup> On the problem of virtual nuclear capacity see Sukeyuki Ichimasa, “The Concept of Virtual Nuclear Arsenals and ‘A World without Nuclear Weapons’,” *NIDS Journal of Defense and Security*, vol. 13, no. 1 (December 2012): 23–37.

<sup>97</sup> See Article 174 of the *Final Document* (see note 47).

<sup>98</sup> See *ibid.*, Articles 147–224.

<sup>99</sup> On this see Michael Eisenstadt and Mehdi Khalaji, *Nuclear Fatwa. Religion and Politics in Iran's Proliferation Strategy*, Policy Focus 115 (Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2011).

## Ideological and Strategic Confrontations in the Middle East

Iranian Middle Eastern policy focuses on three main regions: Iraq, the Persian Gulf and the Levant. In all three cases ideological and strategic considerations are intertwined, but the emphasis is different in each. With respect to Israel and Palestine the ideological aspect dominates (political Islam, Third World radicalism), whereas vis-à-vis Iraq Iran chiefly pursues the strategic goal of ensuring that Baghdad never again wages war against it. In the Persian Gulf Iran sees itself as a hegemon, which inevitably brings Tehran into conflict with the other Gulf powers, particularly Saudi Arabia (and until 2003 with Iraq too), and with the United States.

### Iran's "Strategic Vision" and Its Limits

Currently we know of no official document in which Iran analyses the various strategic challenges and responds to them with a corresponding vision.<sup>100</sup> But even without such a document it is possible to discern the contours of a vision guided by central ideological, security and interest-led aspects.<sup>101</sup> It is determined chiefly by two elements: the long-term goal of getting the United States to leave the region and the paradigm that Israel is an illegitimate state.

Like many revolutionary regimes, Iranian decision-makers extrapolate their own experiences onto the region. They assume, in other words, that the cultural gap between the pro-Western or Westernised elites and the general population is so great that pro-Western regimes will either be voted out in free elections or ousted through revolutions. The governments that would come to power subsequently would rely less on the Western elites and in the medium term break with them entirely. National interests and public opinion would hence play a greater role for the future policy

of these countries than it has up to now, as would political Islam.<sup>102</sup>

These changes would in turn have far-reaching strategic consequences, for the disappearance of pro-Western Arab governments would step up the political and diplomatic pressure on Israel and the United States. The latter would then find it increasingly difficult to maintain a presence in the region and would at some point have to drastically decrease its troops stationed there or even withdraw altogether. Israel, the "Zionist regime", would in the long term disappear like all the other regimes, since the pressure on the Arab majority in mandate Palestine (i.e. Israel and the occupied territories) could not be maintained indefinitely. The end of the Apartheid regime in South Africa and the repatriation of Algerian French could be cited as historical precedents in this connection.

A peaceful "South-South integration" (in other words economic and political cooperation between the states in the region without Western interference) with an Islamic flavour would be the natural conclusion of such a development. Of course, the interests of these states would still differ from those of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but the benefits – initially economic and later political and security – of such regional integration would soon become evident. As one of the largest and most populous countries in the region Iran would, according to its own vision, without much ado, continue to play an important role and ideally assume the leadership. All Iran would have to do would be to stand firm, especially on the Palestinian question and on the nuclear programme. The first would justify Iran's claim to lead the Islamic world, the second would make Tehran the hegemon of the Persian Gulf.

Iran's Shiite identity and military-strategic realities in the Persian Gulf impose limits on this vision, however.

<sup>100</sup> A series of confidential or secret documents must, however, exist, as suggested by Asgari, "Iran's Defense Diplomacy" (see note 7), *passim*.

<sup>101</sup> See Walter Posch, "The Arab Spring: A Warm Welcome from Tehran," *Geopolitica*, vol. 43 (Autumn–Winter 2011), 72–78.

<sup>102</sup> Ghadir Nasri, "The Nature of Regime Change in the Arab World," *Discourse. An Iranian Quarterly*, vol. 10, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2012): 61–96 (80–83); Amir-Mohammad Haji-Yousefi, "Iran and the 2011 Arab Revolutions: Perceptions and Actions," *Discourse. An Iranian Quarterly* vol. 10, nos. 1–2 (Winter–Spring 2012): 23–60 (26–33).

## The Persian Gulf

The relationship of the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf to the Islamic Republic of Iran is characterised by mistrust – a mistrust of Iranian nationalism and a mistrust rooted in the fear that Iran will exert a subversive influence on the Shiites in the region. Iran has already tried to do this once – and failed. During the 1980s Iran sought to mobilise the Shiites in the Middle East and Gulf regions for its own foreign policy purposes, but under President Mohammad Khatami the Iranian leadership finally gave up this policy, thereafter assigning less importance to the Shiite factor in bilateral relations with the Gulf states.

## Confession-neutral Foreign Policy and Nationalism

Bloody confrontations between the confessions in neighbouring Pakistan and the rise of Al-Qaida and similar groups in the late 1990s have bolstered Tehran's pursuit of a new "confession-neutral" foreign policy. This was severely put to the test in *Bahrain* in 2011. Initially Tehran showed restraint during the mass protests in the small island state in spring 2011, endeavouring not to endanger relations with the King of Bahrain and to strengthen his position vis-à-vis the pro-Saudi prime minister. Even after the Saudis invaded Bahrain, Iranian diplomats avoided interpreting events in confessional terms. When the human rights situation in Bahrain worsened, Iran called for a UN resolution in favour of the oppressed Shiites but refrained from taking any concrete political steps.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, with respect to Bahrain Iran's confession-neutral policy can be considered to have failed, since Tehran has not managed to assuage the fears of Arab leaders that Iran might play the "Shiite card".

Another reason for the Arab mistrust was the fact that although Tehran had reduced the confessional factor in its Gulf policy, it still exhibited Iranian nationalism and once again behaved like a Persian superpower in the Gulf region. The conflict about what the correct name of the "Persian" Gulf should be, which assumed international dimensions, allowed Iran to project an image internally and vis-à-vis Iranians in exile as the protector and guarantor of national honour and of the country's territorial integrity. Iran's occupation of the Tunb-Islands (Greater and Lesser

Tunb and Abu Musa) in 1992 was motivated by strategic considerations but also served to underline Iran's power and strength. Since then the dispute over the islands has strained Iran's relationship with the United Arab Emirates and with the Gulf Cooperation Council, although there has been some small measure of detente over the past two years.<sup>104</sup>

## Iran and the Fifth Fleet

The chief and most explosive conflict in the Gulf region, however, is that between Iran and the United States, represented by the US Fifth Fleet. The US presence in the Persian Gulf is strategically motivated and serves to safeguard the flow of oil from the region, to protect the United States' Arab allies and to prevent the establishment of another hegemonial power.<sup>105</sup> To this end the United States has concluded a number of bilateral security treaties with the Arab Gulf states, which neither commit the United States to defending these states nor contain any provisions that would allow it to attack third party states.<sup>106</sup> This explains why many states in the region have also concluded security agreements with the Islamic Republic of Iran, for example, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq and Oman. Oman indisputably has the best relationship with Iran and has used this on repeated occasions to mediate between Washington and Tehran.<sup>107</sup> The bilateral agreements between Iran and its neighbours are not strategic alliances, but they do testify to shared security interests and thus run counter to the US policy of isolating Iran<sup>108</sup> – as in the case of Iraq. This is not actually a defence alliance, even if Tehran likes to perceive it as such,<sup>109</sup> but an important agreement regulating border traffic and border security.

<sup>104</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service (CRS), Dezember 2011 (CRS Report for Congress RS21852), 13–14.

<sup>105</sup> See Gary Sick, "The United States and the Persian Gulf in the Twentieth Century," in *The Persian Gulf in History*, ed. Lawrence G. Potter (New York, 2009): 295–310.

<sup>106</sup> Kenneth Katzman, *The Persian Gulf States, Post-War Issues for U.S. Policy*, CRS Report for Congress RL31533 (Washington, D.C.: CRS, July 2003), 18–19.

<sup>107</sup> Jeffrey A. Lefebvre, "Oman's Foreign Policy in the Twenty First Century," *Middle East Policy* 17, vol. 1 (Spring 2010): 99–114.

<sup>108</sup> Peter Alsiss, Marissa Allison, and Anthony H. Cordesman, *U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition in the Gulf States and Yemen* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, March 16, 2012), 5.

<sup>109</sup> "Fear in the West of the Founding of Defence Alliance between Iraq and Iran" (Persian), October 6, 2012, <http://www.598.ir>.

<sup>103</sup> "Massacre of Bahrain's Shiites and the Necessity of a UN-Resolution" (Persian), *Alef*, March 17, 2011.

The United States has been more successful with economic sanctions – its intensification of cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, for example, clearly works to the detriment of Iran. In particular the change in the position of Dubai, which – although located on the opposite shore of the Persian Gulf – had become Iran’s most important trading centre,<sup>110</sup> has increased pressure on Iran. The Emirate of Dubai has recently started to apply sanctions in the finance sector.

With the demise of Iraq as the most important regional actor the United States and Iran now find themselves face-to-face in the Persian Gulf. Iran naturally sees the military presence of the Americans as a threat, but it is managing to live with the situation by allowing operational level contacts between the Iranian Navy and the US Fifth Fleet (bridge-to-bridge contact). Iran nevertheless rejects the formalisation of these contacts that the United States is calling for, since in Tehran’s view this would be tantamount to a recognition of US hegemony.<sup>111</sup> Incidents therefore occur at regular intervals in the Persian Gulf (e.g., August 2007, 2012).<sup>112</sup> Each time Iran emphasises its will to defend itself, while the United States threatens to keep open the Straits of Hormuz by armed force if necessary. So far these crises have always ended peacefully, but the risk of escalation remains. Tehran can be happy with the status quo as long as it does not force it to come to a strategic understanding with Washington. But every time there is a Hormuz crisis it becomes evident for the whole world to see that Iran is still the leading power in the Persian Gulf after the United States.

## The “Axis of Resistance” and the Battle for Palestine

As a Shiite and Persian country, Iran has few points of contact with the Levant, the only exception being the Shiites in Lebanon. This is why Tehran emphasises its role as a revolutionary Islamic state vis-à-vis the

Middle East and offers itself to the Palestinians as a protector or at least as a strategic partner. The so-called “axis of resistance” against Israel and the West was an ideological construct designed to focus the strategic interests of different actors towards a single goal, namely the fight against Israel. A central motive for the invocation of such an alliance is the conviction of the Iranian leadership that those regimes and movements that continue to oppose Israel enjoy the greatest popular legitimacy. De facto this means an alliance between Iran, Syria, the Shiite Lebanese party Hezbollah and various (Sunni) Palestinian groups, above all Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Relations between Iran and Syria are rooted in a strategic alliance against Saddam Hussein. Following the overthrow of the Iraqi dictator in 2003 the two partners became even closer.<sup>113</sup> The “axis of resistance” served Damascus as a way to maintain pressure on Israel with respect to the Golan Heights and to mitigate its own isolation. Intelligence cooperation between Iran and Syria is directed above all against Iraq, Lebanon and the activities of the Kurdish PKK. Iran for its part has within the alliance often proved willing to mediate in the difficult relationship between the Syrians and Hezbollah.<sup>114</sup> And contacts with Islamic Jihad have run via both Damascus and Beirut.

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is the only Palestinian group that identifies with the Islamic revolution in Iran.<sup>115</sup> Its relations with Tehran are therefore close, and Iran is probably their only sponsor. From this most observers conclude that the Iranians have the greatest influence on this group. During the Syrian crisis the leadership of PIJ, however, decided like Hamas to leave Damascus.

Unlike Hezbollah Iran has never really had a close relationship of trust with Hamas.<sup>116</sup> The Hamas leadership has always been aware of its importance for Iran and has used its visits to Tehran mainly to embarrass the Arab financiers from the Gulf region. Yet from an ideological point of view the Islamic Republic of Iran

<sup>110</sup> According to Hourcade, *Géopolitique de l'Iran* (see note 1), 191.

<sup>111</sup> Sascha Albrecht and Walter Posch, *Sabre-Rattling in the Persian Gulf. Legal and Military Aspects of the Ideological Confrontation between Iran and the United States*, SWP-Comments 14/2012 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, April 2012).

<sup>112</sup> Walter Posch, “Provoking an Agreement? The Hormuz Incident Revisited,” in *Leadership in Challenging Situations*, ed. Harald Haas, Franz Kernic, and Andrea Plaschke (Frankfurt, 2012): 267–75.

<sup>113</sup> Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran. Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East*, New York 2006; Chehabi, “Iran and Lebanon” (see note 28), 287–308.

<sup>114</sup> Olfa Lamoulou, “La Syrie et le Hezbollah” (see note 29), 93–108; Naim Qassem, *Hizbullah. The Story from Within* (London, 2005), 239–43.

<sup>115</sup> Jim Zanotti, *The Palestinians. Background and US Relations*, CRS Report for Congress RL34074 (Washington, D.C.: CRS, August 2012), 25.

<sup>116</sup> Jim Zanotti, *HAMAS, Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report for Congress R41514 (Washington, D.C.: CRS, December 2010), 22, 23.

has no role to play for Hamas, although the Iranians would have welcomed this.<sup>117</sup> The fact that the Palestinian organisations had a second big sponsor in Syria must have diminished Tehran's influence still further. For Hamas Iran has remained mainly of interest as a supplier of arms, a financier and a counterweight to the Arab states, whereas Tehran has sought through its support for Hamas to legitimise itself as an Islamic protector in the Levant.<sup>118</sup>

Given this major divergence in interests, the question arises of whether the "axis of resistance" was actually more propaganda than reality. It was certainly not sufficient to bring about military solidarity between the partners of the axis either in 2006 (battles between Israel and the Hezbollah) or in 2008 and 2012 (Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip) and was really only successful as a loose alliance of states and organisations that formed a political opposition to Saudi-Arabia.

### Strategic Confrontations during the Arab Spring

The changes that took place in the wake of the Arab Spring at the turn of the year 2010/11 seemed to confirm the Iranian vision of the long-term development of the region (see above, p. 25): in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya pro-Western regimes were deposed and Islamic forces came to power. The Iranians placed great hopes on Egypt, which Tehran sees as a future partner. The fact that Cairo gave an Iranian warship permission to sail through the Suez Canal into the eastern Mediterranean was evaluated as a major success.

### The Saudi Backlash and the Rift with Turkey

The backlash came in Bahrain in March 2011. The intervention of the troops of the Gulf Cooperation Council led by Saudi Arabia ("Peninsula Shield") in the small island state represented the culmination of a long series of measures taken by Saudi Arabia to push back Iranian influence in the region. These had included activities in the sphere of political communication such as the propagation of a "Shiite crescent"

<sup>117</sup> Javad Al-Hamd and Ayad Bargouthi (eds.), *An Overview of the Political Thinking of the Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine (HAMAS), 1987–1996* (translated from Arabic into Persian by Seyyed Hoseyn Mousavi) (Tehran, 1997).

<sup>118</sup> Zanotti, *The Palestinians* (see note 115), 12, 15.

consisting of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas, aiming to delegitimise or render obsolete Iranian rhetoric about the "axis of resistance" as well as statements by high-up Saudis expressly advocating military steps against Iran or accusing Tehran of being responsible for all conflicts in the region. It also included the rejection of Iraqi Premier Maleki, who is regarded as sympathising with Iran, and finally the support for Sunni rebels in Iraq.<sup>119</sup>

The Iranian leadership underestimated both the threat perception of the Saudis in Bahrain and their determination to act without American approval. With this operation the Saudis managed to stand up to Iran as the regional power and to present it as a protector of the Shiites. As Tehran visibly sought a de-escalation, Foreign Minister Salehi emphasised that good relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey were a priority for Iran.

Nevertheless, bilateral relations with Turkey deteriorated during 2011. In the spring of that year Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan had condemned the Saudi intervention in Bahrain even more harshly than the Iranians. In retrospect the Turkish change of heart appears less surprising. Although Turkish-Iranian relations had undergone a continual improvement since 2002, this was soon tempered by the realisation that while Turkey was fundamentally oriented towards the West, the Iranians pursued an anti-Western revolutionary line.<sup>120</sup> The deployment of the NATO missile detection and radar tracking system in Turkey and the strange circumstances surrounding the arrest and release of PKK leader Murat Karayilan by Iranian security forces in September 2011 led to a rapid deterioration of the relationship.<sup>121</sup> The real problem, however, was the two countries' divergent stances on Syria. When the human-rights situation in Syria took a dramatic turn for the worse, Turkey sided against the Assad regime while Iran continued to back it.

### Escalation in Syria

The change in the Turkish position was the first sign that Tehran stood alone in the region in its support

<sup>119</sup> Helene Cooper, "Saudis' Role in Iraq Frustrates U.S. Officials," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2007.

<sup>120</sup> Bayram Sinkaya, "Rationalization of Turkey-Iran Relations: Prospects and Limits," *Insight Turkey*, vol. 14, no. 2 (2012): 137–56.

<sup>121</sup> "Irans PKK-Answer to Bülent Arinc" (Turkish), *Cumhuriyet*, August 13, 2012.

for the Syrian regime. The suspension of Syrian membership in the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in August 2012 and the impossibility of getting a pro-Syrian declaration passed at the non-aligned conference strengthened this impression of isolation. Even worse for Iran, however, was the destruction of a cherished political paradigm. The strategic concept of the “axis of resistance” was based, as mentioned above, on the notion that anti-Zionist regimes enjoy broad support in the population, which was now shown not to be the case. In the summer of 2011 serious debates took place in the Iranian media about Iran’s policy toward Syria; these were, however, quickly quelled. On the international level Tehran supported the Annan Plan and later the efforts of Lakhdar Brahimi, parallel to this the Iranians attempted in unofficial talks to convince Assad to introduce substantial reforms. Yet in early 2012 Supreme Leader Khamenei not only demonstratively gave his backing to Bashar al-Assad; he also obligated the Lebanese Hezbollah to support the Syrian Baathists. This apparently came in the wake of a failed attempt by Iranian diplomats to initiate talks with parts of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. Having taken up such an uncompromising position, it now became difficult if not impossible for Iran to back down from this foreign policy line. The “axis of resistance” became a complete farce, however, after Hamas left it in mid-2012 and moved its headquarters from Damascus back to Qatar.<sup>122</sup> The visit of the Emir of Qatar to Gaza constituted a further humiliation for Iran, for no other gesture would have illustrated so clearly that the Palestinian issue had once again become an Arab affair, and one with a Wahhabi flavour to boot.

In general Iranian foreign policy was very slow to react to the events in Syria. There are both ideological and strategic reasons for this: first of all the ideological paradigm of the “axis of resistance” prevented any debate about the possible legitimacy of the Syrian rebels for this would have destroyed the pretence of the alliance against Israel enjoying popular support. It is a pretence that from mid-October 2012 onwards could in any case no longer be publically maintained in Iran,<sup>123</sup> yet Supreme Leader Khamenei continues to adhere to it in his statements. Accordingly, official

Iranian statements in October 2012 underlined the importance of the arsenal of rockets supplied by Tehran to the Gaza Strip for Hamas’s fight against Israel. A further explanation for this stubborn determination to keep the axis alive is Iran’s close intelligence and military cooperation with Syria. The IRGC and intelligence services have cooperated with Syria ever since they were founded and this relationship is vital for Iranian power projection in Lebanon. Finally, the Iranians assume that the Assad regime, though weakened, is not yet finished. The leadership in Tehran believes that the conflict will continue for a long time and eventually involve the whole region. This is why the most important declarations of support for the regime have come from the Iranian security apparatus, although the embarrassing hostage-taking of IRGC operatives by Syrian rebels in summer 2012<sup>124</sup> made Tehran nervous.

There are no official declarations about how Iranian decision-makers imagine the post-Assad era, but two goals seem plausible: first, to prevent a major flaring up of Sunni-Shiite conflicts, which would ultimately affect every state in the region; and second, to enable Iran to maintain as large a presence as possible in the region. The Egyptian initiative in September 2012 to form a “Syrian Quartet”, consisting of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and Iran, was welcomed by Tehran for precisely this reason.<sup>125</sup> Irrespective of whether this quartet actually comes into being – Saudi-Arabia cancelled its attendance at a meeting at ministerial level at short notice – Tehran appears willing to participate in a transformation process in Syria. This change of position in the background is most probably motivated by pragmatic interests – *maslahat* – but with the end of the “axis of resistance” a change of ideological paradigm is surely on the cards sooner or later. It thus looks as if Syria is where the strategic and ideological future of the Islamic Republic of Iran will be decided.

**122** Erik Mohns and André Bank, “Syrian Revolt Fallout: End of the Resistance Axis?,” *Middle East Policy*, vol. 19, no. 3 (Autumn 2012): 25–35 (31).

**123** “Cluster Bombs Dropped on the People of Syria: How Will History Judge Our Silence?” (Persian), *Baztab*, October 15, 2012.

**124** Thomas Shanker and Damien Cave, “Syrian Rebels Said to Be Holding Elite Fighters from Iran,” *The New York Times*, August 15, 2012.

**125** “Egypt Hosts Summit of New Quartet on Syria, Hoping to Persuade Iran to Change Stance,” *CBS News*, September 11, 2012.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

While the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has an ideological foundation, its translation into practice is pragmatic. Political Islam plays only a minor role in relations with the international community, since the question of who is the true “commander of the faithful” in the Islamic world is of little importance for the rest of the world. Given Iran’s Persian-Shiite identity and Tehran’s failure so far to instrumentalise the region’s Shiites, it remains unlikely that the Iranian variant of an Islamic republic will become a role model for the Middle East.

More problematic for the West is Iran’s espousal of a Third World ideology and the anti-Americanism inherent in this. The Third World ideology is a problem because it offers no set of instruments that would allow a conceptionally appropriate response to the challenges of the twentieth century. The intellectual models used to describe the relationship between the First and Third World from the 1950s to the 1970s have at the latest since the demise of the USSR and the globalisation of the 1990s lost their currency. As long as Iran continues to cling to the anti-imperialist clichés of the last century, it will inevitably misunderstand and misinterpret Western intentions. The frustrations of European diplomats about the mutual lack of understanding during the nuclear negotiations testify eloquently to this. Iran’s isolation by large parts of the international community and the pressure of sanctions have made the “ersatz world public sphere” in the form of the non-aligned states ever more important for Iran, which ultimately declared this the “true world community”. Because of its geostrategic position Iran cannot go down the North Korean road of total isolation. In some form or other Iran will always be connected with its neighbouring regions. Yet the more isolated Iran is, the more unpredictable Iranian foreign policy will become. The risk of an escalation of the conflict between the West and Iran would then rise by several orders of magnitude.

An unpredictable, destructive Iran is, however, just as unacceptable for the West as Iranian hegemony in the region. For Europe and the West, therefore, the main question that arises is what position Iran could take and what role it could play, bearing in mind converging interests. The greatest of these are of course

Iran’s role as a reliable energy supplier, as a transport hub between East and West and as a security partner in Afghanistan and elsewhere: in other words, in precisely those areas where Iran sees its economic future. A European vision might be of an Iran as a reliable supplier of energy and a security cooperation partner that maintains a certain strategic distance from Russia.

Under the current circumstances economic and development cooperation are of course impossible; yet, ironically, it is the field of security where cooperation has already become a reality. Important allies of the West such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Qatar and Oman have signed security agreements with both Iran and the United States (or other Western states) or with NATO. This may be regarded as confirmation that Iran’s neighbours are aware of the benefits of a cooperative approach to regional security. Before formal cooperation or official contact can take place, however, Iran needs to further tone down its anti-Americanism and speak directly to the United States. A willingness to do so is already discernible, but the only person who can bring about such a change of paradigm against internal resistance is Supreme Leader Khomeini himself. His ability to change course was already demonstrated when he and Rafsanjani launched the post-revolutionary phase in Iran following the death of Khomeini.

The collapse of the “axis of resistance” – an ideological disaster from an Iranian point of view – will reinforce this process, albeit with the proviso that the West includes Tehran in a peaceful solution for Syria. The implication is that the involvement of Iran in the Syrian transformation process would also contain Iran’s interest in exerting influence in the region. The only role that Iran would be able to play in the Levant, would then be that of an indirect partner of the West, since both sides share the same fears about the activities of radical Sunni Islamist groups.

The danger of a flaring up of religious conflicts is equally high for both the West and Iran; neither, however, possesses the capability beyond placatory declarations to prevent this happening. Here the West needs to strengthen Egypt’s leadership role, since on account of its history and its important function as a

leading Arab power only Egypt would be in a position to counter the defamation of Arab Shiites by emphasising their Arab-Muslim identity. In the medium term that would also raise the status of Iraq as an Arab-Shiite country and thus restore the old balance between Iraq and Iran, only this time on the basis of identity.

Given the dramatic regional developments Iran's relationship with the West needs to be reconsidered by both sides. A prerequisite for this would be to expand contacts with the Iranian think tank scene, thus facilitating a more sophisticated exchange of views and minimising the risk of false signals and misunderstandings of the kind that have often occurred in recent years through self-appointed intermediaries and commentators. Of paramount importance are direct American-Iranian contacts. Currently the best contacts between Iran and a Western country are those with Germany, making Germany the obvious candidate for trans-Atlantic mediation.

Even if there are grounds for optimism, one should not fall prey to any illusions: the future of Iran and the region does not depend solely on how bloody the transformation process in Syria is, but also on whether agreement can be reached on the nuclear issue. Right from the start this has been not just a question of *realpolitik* but an ideological bone of contention, for the Iranians know full well that any solution will have to be reached with rather than against the United States. Either way Tehran will not come out of this ideologically unscathed.

## Abbreviations

CIRE	Centre for International Research and Education
CRS	Congressional Research Service
CSIS	Centre for Strategic and International Studies
CSR	Centre for Strategic Research
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organisation
EUISS	European Union Institute for Security Studies
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IMESS	Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies
IPI	Iran-Pakistan-India (Gas pipeline project)
IPIS	Institute for Political and International Studies
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISJ	International Studies Journal
MRC	Majles Research Center
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OIC	Organisation for Islamic Cooperation
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PKK	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (Kurdistan Workers' Party)
SCIRI	Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq
SNDU	Supreme National Defence University
SNSC	Supreme National Security Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran
TISRI	Tehran International Studies and Research Institute
UN	United Nations